Cahiers Élisabéthains

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Postface

The privilege of a postface, but also its defining challenge, consists in the ambivalent status that it enjoys. As a brief statement that comes *after* other (more substantial) statements, the postface is defined by minority and derivation, depending as it does on prior leading texts, for which it provides a short aftermath and resolution. However, if structurally the postface can be seen as offering (to resort now to a musical homology) a *coda* to the various movements that precede it, it is also meant to combine such a formulaic gesture of achievement or closure with a promise of extension and consequence. The postface, indeed, heralds the afterlife of the texts in the volume, becoming the *envoi* that sends the book off into the world of readers (a world of living vistas that justifies and tantalizes the sedate domains of library stacks and digital databases).

This issue of *Cahiers Élisabéthains* offers a gratifyingly solid basis for both exercises. The essays above fully merit a final acknowledgement, a confirmation that, in their balance of argumentative diversity and thematic cohesion, they constitute a cross section of current perspectives on the volume's dual commitment to myth and Shakespeare. Concomitantly, they justify a forward-looking note on how thoroughly they respond to a range of ongoing concerns that substantially coincides with the remit of the European Shakespeare Research Association (ESRA), the entity behind the memorable conference (made possible by a vibrant Montpellier team) from which this volume derives.

The conference in question was held in 2013, but the specific context in which this special issue appears inevitably helps determine the significance it may acquire: launched in the year that marks the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, it is bound to see its topic of 'Shakespeare and Myth' primarily construed as involving the mythopoeia that has in so many ways enveloped 'the Bard' over the past four centuries. Shakespeare *as* myth is indeed an issue tackled by several contributions in the volume, ranging from early stages in the historical development of celebratory discourses in European literary cultures – Baxter's revisiting of the Shakespeare versus Jonson *topos*; Cheney's focus on examples of 'inscripting William Shakespeare as an icon of authorial fame' from the period 1590–1642; Willems's charting of the gradual 'transfiguration of a playwright into a demi-god' – to the perplexities posed by 'intercultural imaginings of Shakespeare' (Tan), poised between 'expos[ing]the hollow myth of [his] universality' and 'reinstat[-ing]' it under the paradoxical conditions of a global postmodernity. However, the volume responds to our intellectual moment by teasing out other implications of its coupling of

Shakespeare and myth, and some resonate with topical significance in this arch-commemorative year.

One of the trains of thought set off by several contributions to this special issue concerns precisely the conceptual implications of myth and memorialization as regards the production of discourses on the past. A recuperative exercise targeting past conformations may be seen as primarily served by the designs proper to history, often understood as in opposition to those of myth because of their respective constructions of time. Indeed, in some of the most popular disquisitions of this dichotomy, history appears as defined by a rational apprehension of sequence and duration, and myth by a suspension of sequential time that imaginatively (or 'actually', in that sense of reality which is proper to belief systems) allows for events and actions otherwise remote to one another to be suddenly yoked together in a prodigious contemporaneity.[1] Exercises in remembering or recollecting (the very words, in their formation and literal import, assist this perception) rather obviously query the neatness of such a distinction between the nexus of history and myth. Although ostensibly grounded on a sober understanding of historical time, such exercises, through the cultural practices that realize them, often owe their appeal and success to imaginative and emotional effects that appear predicated on mythical time, and on the opportunities for reliving and re-enacting that it affords. As highlighted in recent studies,[2] Shakespeare has often become the central object of a commemorative ambition that might emblazon itself with some of his most memorable phrasings: 'all in war with Time for love of you', 'so long lives this …'.

These are, of course, representations – in the Shakespearean lines just echoed, of personal emotion, its yearnings and urgencies, retrospections and anticipations; and the notion of representation is key to the tense bond of myth and memory brought out in some of the articles above. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, '*re*-presentation [is that which] always comes after', hence 'all representation … is based on memory' and 'memory … is itself based on representation', since 'the mode of memory is *recherche* rather than recuperation'.[3] The latter remark reveals Huyssen's endorsement of the forms of scepticism that, pointedly targeting 'the delusion of pure presence',[4] have marked the intellectual history of the past half century, determining the favour enjoyed by a sense of the textual constructedness of the past.

Such scepticism has inevitably also affected the terms in which the legacy of 'myth criticism' has been relayed into our time, querying (for example) the polarities of 'representational' and 'mythic' modes that Northrop Frye so influentially proposed by the middle of the twentieth century.[5] The inflections undergone by myth criticism in the intellectual environment of postmodernity are certainly in evidence in the papers in this special issue, notably so when they interrogate not just the myth of Shakespeare but pointedly also myth *in* and *after* Shakespeare, as it operates in the textual canon (its readings, revisions and rewritings) and in the course of a rich stage history.

Chartier's essay on *Cardenio*, for example, highlights the element of verbal fashioning by pondering the myth of a lost text, an elusive (but imaginatively and textually productive) ghostly presence; while Franssen reminds us that autobiographical readings of the sonnets compose 'a flexible myth, which allows us to construct a Shakespeare according to our needs'. A strong sense of contingency, combined with a reflection on

the degree of self-consciousness in literary handlings of myth, also arises from Hattaway's argument that Shakespeare's mind was 'heuristic', 'interrogat[ing]' rather than stating, and effectively 'reforging' myths, rather than just relaying or 'transporting' them.

Circumstance and contingent factors: the role they play in the opportunities for meaning set off by Shakespearean drama, often through its deployment or activation of myth, is brought to the fore in those essays that directly address the issue of power relations in a variety of historical scenarios. By focusing on 'two German engagements with the Caesar myth', Höfele brings out the uses of *Julius Caesar* in a range of nineteenth-century discourses on power and alerts us to how the most mythologized of authors can yield demythified perceptions of human behaviour and intent – the 'centre of the canon' found to be a source of glimpses, from the sidelines, at the excesses of human self-centredness. This awareness is, in different ways, shared by Limon and Niagolov, whose essays expose respectively the myth-infused tensions between past and present in post-communist – and post-Solidarity – Poland; and the successive avatars of a repeatedly mythologized Shakespeare on Bulgarian stages. Both attest to Shakespeare's confirmed ability to remain an expressive focal point for the perplexities experienced by present-day citizens and political elites in societies haunted by the (often unachieved) hopes for what a generation ago was called 'the new Europe'.[6]

The sense of a geopolitical sea change with which that phrase resonated, and the expectations that accompanied the declared end of the Cold War, were a decisive part of the context that saw the first initiatives towards what was to become ESRA. They were energized by a realization of how influential Shakespeare's work had been in providing imaginative redress (often through representations of the past and blueprints for the future that hinged on a precarious balance of history and myth) to individuals and communities living under oppressive conditions; and this fostered the ambition to further promote the study of this most widely read and staged of authors as a rich basis for a broader cultural understanding. A quarter of a century later, we find ourselves commending this special issue on Shakespeare and Myth in the middle of intense celebrations of the Bard – but also in a context in which 'the music of what happens'[7] may often seem jarring rather than jubilant: discourses on Europe seem to resonate with calls for breakup and 'exit' more regularly than with vows of mutuality and integration, and the pressures of human mobility all around us are faced with hesitation and uncertainty.

Current challenges are certainly different, but ESRA's wish to inquire further into 'Shakespeare … and the construction of European culture and identity/ies',[8] and to do so not in a mode of cultural solipsism, but in full ethical awareness of a world of non-European Others to whom Shakespeare memorably gave voices, remains valid and vibrant. To this project (further confirmed by our activity since our great Montpellier get-together)[9] the present volume offers a welcome and imaginatively exciting contribution – which I proudly and gratefully endorse.

Rui Carvalho Homem
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Notes

1. The most influential account of this mutually defining opposition between myth and history is arguably still Mircea Eliade's in *The Myth of Eternal Return* (1949), trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1954).
2. E.g. by Ton Hoenselaars and Clara Calvo in their 'Introduction' to an issue of *Critical Survey*, 22: 2 (2010), 1–10.
3. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York, Routledge, 1995), 2–3.
4. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 3.
5. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1957), 131–40.
6. The title of a conference held in Bulgaria in 1993 (one of the earliest in a series of initiatives that were to eventuate in the creation of ESRA), and also of an ensuing volume, ed. Michael Hattaway, Boika Sokolova and Derek Roper (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), which has recently been reissued (London, Bloomsbury, 2015).
7. A phrase, originally from a medieval Gaelic source, used by Seamus Heaney in his poem 'Song', from his collection *Field Work* (London, Faber, 1979), 56.
8. From the description of ESRA's remit on our website, http://www.um.es/shakespeare/esra/index.php
9. Including our conference in Worcester on 'Shakespeare's Europe – Europe's Shakespeare(s)' (2015), and advanced plans for a Gdańsk conference on 'Shakespeare and European Theatrical Cultures' 27–30 July 2017.